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Addis Ababa
Ethiopia
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To those who hold the ropes,

SOMEWHERE SOMEBODY PRAYED...

The big orange African sun was just coming up over the trees at 0715 when we flew out of our SIM station at Nyememeri in the far south of Ethiopia about 15 km from the Kenya border. I had traveled down the day before by AFS (Abyssinian Flight Service) to visit Dick and Donna Swart at their station along with one of their guests, Debbie Braaksma. Dick and Donna work among the semi-nomadic Daasanach who also spill over into Kenya. We had had a good day seeing their low-tech windmill project which provides water from the Omo River to small plots of land along the river's edge where they grow vegetables, bananas, miringa and mango trees.

The single engine Cessna 206, belonging to AFS which is affiliated with MAF, was flying low over the Omo Valley between the mighty Omo River and the Kenyan border. We were on our way northwest along the Kenya border to Tuliget about 45 minutes away. About 8 minutes into the flight we heard a flapping noise in the engine compartment. The pilot, Vern Bell, thought it was the alternator belt and he quickly banked the plane to return to Nyememeri, meanwhile searching the ground for a landing spot. But the flapping noise changed to a grinding noise with vibrations, and oil began spraying from the engine onto the windshield. Vern turned around and said, "Fasten your seat belts real tight". We were in the middle of the expansive Omo valley flying over swamps and gullies; it was a land pocked with scrub bushes jutting out of the dry ground. We had not yet reached the more rugged climb into the highlands of mountains and forests. But God had provided a flat and smooth space so that Vern quickly landed the 206 on the parched land. Smoke was coming out of the engine so we quickly climbed out of the aircraft to find oil dripping from the engine. I thought, "We are NOT going anywhere for a long time." We were in a "no-man's land" with only the sun and the wind.

Vern took the cowling off the engine in order to assess the damage. He found two gaping holes in the crankcase with a connecting rod sitting on top of one of the cylinders. On further inspection he found that part of the metal from the crankcase had splayed out to within one mm. of one of the 6 fuel lines carrying fuel from the flow divider on top of the crankcase. In fact, it looked like the fuel line had been pushed up. If the fuel line had ruptured, the engine would have caught fire before we could have even landed.

We paused to thank the Lord for the first miracle – a safe landing. Then we wondered if the radio would work so that we could make contact with the AFS base in Addis Ababa and with the Swarts back at Nyememeri. The SIM radio schedule would come on at 8 AM each morning; it was now about 7:30 AM. Second miracle – Vern was able to make good contact with the AFS base to tell them what happened and to give them our GPS (Global Position System). This pinpoints exactly where we had landed. Then we made contact with the SIM radio and informed SIM Addis Ababa base and the Swarts of what had happened. Third miracle – the Swarts also "happened" to have a GPS which could then direct them to us without them wandering all over the Omo valley looking for us even though we were only 11.8 miles (as the crow flies) from their base. Thank you, Lord.

Our only company was a small fox a short distance away and a swarm of bees that took a liking to the inside of the airplane and to the oil dripping on the ground. There were absolutely no people around.

Later we found out that we were in an area where no Daasanach or their cattle dared to come for fear of raids from the Turkana in Kenya. The Bumi were also not far away but they were at peace with the Daasanach for the present.

We spent the time waiting for our rescuers under the shade of the wing of the airplane. A few days before I had been reading Psalm 91. Verse 1 says, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Verse 4 says "He will cover you with his feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge." Fourth miracle – God provided shade for us in the heat of the Omo valley when we did not have much water with us. God had even covered the valley floor with small white morning glories and little yellow and purple flowers. Thank you, Lord.

Forty kilometers and 2 ½ hours later, the Swarts arrived in their beat-up pickup truck that had a problem with its clutch and its ability to get into 4WD. They had gotten stuck in the mud once and had skirted swamps and gullies to reach us. They also had 2 well-armed Daasanach with them – one with an AK47 and one with a G3 with enough bullets in one belt to wrap around one of their skinny frames more than once. Having refilled our water bottles, we retraced the vehicle tracks back to "civilization" and in the process also tried to find a smoother route in the event the plane would have to be towed very slowly back to the Nyememeri base for eventual engine change. We arrived "home" after 2 hours of dodging holes, swamps and rough ground through tufty grass. Before we shared some food together we sang the Doxology in thanksgiving for His many mercies and goodness to us.

AFS flew another plane down on Sunday, January 26, and we resumed our flight to Tuliget and then flew on to Gambela and over to Gore and then home to Addis Ababa. Looking out of the window of that plane, I saw many mountains, forests and uninhabited areas where it would have been absolutely impossible to land. Thank you, Lord.

The Civil Aviation Authority flew down with Vern on January 27 and agreed that it was not pilot error and it was only the skill of the pilot which brought the plane down successfully. Vern was again cleared to fly. Thursday and Friday the Swarts found a good path through the Omo plains and towed the airplane back to their base station so that it is much more secure while it waits for a new engine. Thank you, Lord.

What does it feel like to have been only one mm. from death? Perfect peace. In that short minute or two from the time the noise began in the engine and the plane glided down to the ground, I felt no fear at all. I realized that God still had work for us to do. I realized that somebody somewhere had prayed for us.

Thank you, Lord, for those who pray faithfully for missionaries – for our safety, our health, our physical, emotional and spiritually well-being, our ministries. May God continue to encourage you to pray even though you do not always have the "full story" at that particular moment.

I plan to fly out of Addis Ababa on February 28 and arrive in Toronto on March 1 to begin my six-month home assignment. My address will be 2405 – 11 Ave. South, Lethbridge, AB T1K 0K6. Phone number: 403 328 5935. E-mail address while at home: ssok@telusplanet.net
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In His Grip,

Jean Sokvitne